THORNTON BEACH STATE PARK

Daly City, California

GEOLOGY OF THORNTON BEACH AREA
By N. J. Lee

A SHORT HISTORY OF THORNTON STATE BEACH
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HISTORY OF THORNTON BEACH STATE PARK

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## A SHORT HISTORY OF THORNTON STATE BEACH

Thornton State Beach comprises approximately fifty acres of land just south of the San Francisco - San Mateo county line. The park itself is at the end of Alemany Boulevard in Daly City facing out across the Pacific towards the Farallon Islands, 27 miles away.

Undoubtedly various American Indian groups passed across this land at one time or another. A large colony of mussels on the appropriately-named Mussel Rock, south of Thornton Beach was probably a good gathering place for the shellfish. Access to the beach was and is difficult, however, and Indian encampments were probably located at sites with easier access to the beach and its shellfish. At any rate, there are no apparent Indian cultural remains in the area.

The first white men to set foot here were almost certainly Spanish explorers under the command of Gaspar Portola. In 1769 they were exploring the coast of Alta California northwards from what is now Mexico, looking for good harbors. Sergeant Jose Ortega, the expedition's pathfinder, and some of Portola's men descended from Montara mountain and proceeded up the coast through the vicinity of Pacifica and Thornton Beach. They turned back when they came to the Golden Gate.

In 1775 the first European ship entered San Francisco Bay. This was the "San Carlos" under Juan Manuel de Ayala. He spent six weeks exploring and surveying the bay. A year later the first settlers arrived to settle the area at sites chosen previously by Juan Bautista de Anza. These sites later became the Fort in the Presidio and Mission Dolores. (Mision San Francisco de Asis).

Between 1776 and 1822 the land was under the control of the missions and the area became particularly known for farming, salt-gathering and sheep ranching. However, the land was eventually split up and parcelled out into individual land grants. (See enclosed map Ranchos of San Mateo County.) This resulted from a dispute between the missions and government officials. These officials claimed the missions had a monopoly on the price of beef sold to the government Presidio. An investigation was ordered by the Viceroy and he ordered the program of individual land grants.

Thornton Beach was isolated between four of these land grants. 'Rancho de la Merced' was on the north, 'San Pedro Ranch' on the south, and 'Buri Buri' and 'Guadalupe La Visitacion y Rodeo Viejo' on the east. One reason why Thornton Beach was not included in any of these grants may have been because of the sand dunes there which could not be farmed. Also, there were some mission buildings in the vicinity, as well as workers and priests. Thus, the land remained ungranted up to the verge of American occupation.

With the coming of the American occupation in California, the land was taken over by the U.S. Government. The U.S. Land Commission assumed all claims to be spurious and required any claims to go through legal proceedings before being granted. The land had been sold in small acreages by the U.S. Government prior to the Homestead Act of 1853.

The buyers of this land were young veterans of the Mexican-American War. They bought the land with their war bonuses which came in the form

of land bounty certificates. These certificates were part payment for tracts of 40, 60, or 140 acres, as they were able. The land around Thornton Beach had been claimed by the grantees of 'Rancho Laguna de la Merced' but the claim was denied and in 1853 the land was released for sale as U.S. Government property. Eventually 17 small houses were constructed, within sight of each other. There were 21 original settlers, among them being Robert Sheldon Thornton, for whom the beach is now named. Potatoes and other garden vegetables grew well and the settlers prospered for six years.

Then trouble came. The latest owners of 'Rancho Laguna de la Merced' were trying to obtain some good land in addition to the sand dunes around Lake Merced. They obtained a court order for a survey in an attempt to get their grant relocated farther south.

The first inkling of this new state of affairs came to the settlers when they found surveyors trampling through their crops. The farmers were frustrated in their attempts to protect their land. Nothing seemed to avail. Some of them were evicted by the sheriff's posse. At this point the settlers decided to resist. They fortified a barn on the farm of I.A. Knowles (present day Knowles Avenue) with bags of potatoes, armed themselves and set up a brass cannon. This was in 1859 and there was almost a "Battle of Colma" but the settlers were persuaded to abandon their fort. Instead, they organized the North San Mateo Settlers' Union and elected R. S. Thornton president. The purpose of the union was to fight the new survey legally. The case was carried through the courts for a number of years, eventually ending

up in the Supreme Court. Thornton spent most of the Civil War in Washington fighting this legal battle. Finally, in 1866 the issue was settled in favor of the settlers and they were able to return to their land.

From 1866 to about 1900 the area in and around Thornton Beach was privately owned. There were some 10 to 15 different parcels of property under various private ownerships. R. S. Thornton owned about 160 acres in the area which now approximates Thornton Beach State Park.

As more settlers arrived the unincorporated town of Colma grew up. It was famous for dairy farms, blacksmith shops, cemetaries and taverns. Truck-farming became important, too. The area known as Colma extended south from San Francisco to the boundaries of Rancho Buri Buri. At one time Colma residents tried to incorporate part of their town as Lawndale but this was unsuccessful as there existed another town of the same name elsewhere.

The town of Colma expanded south and west. In 1913 a part of this area was incorporated as Daly City after John D. Daly, a prominent dairy farmer and rancher. Prior to this it had been known as Daly's Ranch and Daly's Hill and latterly as Vista Grande. All during this time the coastside was extensively cultivated in vegetable truck-farms, even after the construction and paving of the coast highway which is here called Skyline Boulevard.

Before the construction of Westlake (now a part of Daly City, which is adjacent to Thornton Beach) a deep creek flowed southward

through the sand dunes around Lake Merced and through the area where the Westlake shopping center now stands.

Above the creek near the Olympic Club there was a small chalk mine where chalk was sent to San Francisco.

In the 1870's, about half a mile from Thornton there was a Chinese cemetary.

All this area was bulldozed over to make room for Doelger housing estates.

In 1903 a four mast barque, the "Gifford" ran aground at Mussel Rock. She was inbound for San Francisco with 3600 tons of coal from Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia. She turned in too soon, while following the coast north, ran ashore and became a total loss. Her master, David Michie, lost his license for six months.

The big event which really opened up the coastside was the construction of the Oceanshore Railroad in 1905. Construction was started simultaneously in September of that year at both ends of the right-of-way. As originally envisioned, the railway was to be an electrified double track from San Francisco to Santa Cruz. There was no direct road at that time along the coast. The railway led from San Francisco up what is now Alemany Boulevard, and from there along the coast, in several areas right through precipitous cliffs. Where the line first came to the coast is now the entrance to Thornton Beach. There was a station there called Thornton Station.

In actual fact, except for the first few miles, the line was never electrified. After that it was steam powered. Nor was the line ever completely finished. Service by Stanley Steamer bus

connected the two rail lines between Tunitas Canyon and Swanton-Davenport. Construction was delayed by the 1906 earthquake, which caused quite a bit of damage in the Thornton Beach area by landslides and also at the Devils Slide area. Also many of the stockbrokers' holdings were wiped out.

Services started first on June 15, 1906 on the southern end of the track from Santa Cruz northwards. The north end was completed to Pedro Valley (Tobin) by the end of 1907. The precarious financial condition of the company caused the line to operate services on both ends simultaneously before completion, and the popularity of this idea was rewarding. The north end did not reach Tunitas Glen until the end of 1908. A 26-mile gap was never completed.

In 1910 the company became bankrupt. It was taken over by new management however, but in late summer or early fall of 1920, demands for a pay hike caused a final closing, and the railway was abandoned.

In the mid 1930's the right of way was taken over for the construction of the coast Highway 1 which superseded a meandering dirt road which up 'til then was the only road down the coast.

This original roadbed lasted until January 1, 1963 when high maintenance costs and subsidence due to an earthquake closed the portion between Thornton Beach and Pacifica.

After the demise of the railroad, part of the land around Thornton was purchased by the Spring Valley Water Company. The area above and including Thornton Beach valley was farmed at this time by 'Rancho de la Mare' (1909-1910 to 1950). The rancho leased the land from the

Spring Valley Water Company who also owned the land to the east of the highway.

Some small parcels of land were forfeited to the State in lieu of delinquent taxes.

The ranch buildings stood until recently. They were torn down about 1953 when Skyline Boulevard was widened. Land was bought on either side of the highway for possible use as an overpass.

The land of 'Rancho de la Mare' was leased by a family called Antonello and five partners. Southwards the land was leased by a family called Gaggero, who also had a tavern there called 'Angelo's Corners', near the present Westmore Avenue.

The usual crops included cabbages, brussel sprouts, lettuce, artichokes, carrots and potatoes. The area was irrigated from a deep well in Thornton Beach Valley about 200 yards north of the present parking lot. Water was pumped into a tank there, and then up over the bluffs.

During the years of prohibition Thornton Beach was used for smuggling. Small boats landed on the beach and the liquor was taken up the trail for distribution to a thirsty public.

During and after the depression years (1938-1950), and possibly before, gold was produced from Thornton Beach sands by small washing plants. Between 1938 and 1941 $13,000 was taken out. The most productive area was just south of Fleishacker Zoo. The gold seemed to be most plentiful after a heavy winter storm. Some narrow goldbearing quartz veins have been found in metamorphic rocks in the general area.

Apparently there was a double gangland murder at Thornton during the '30's; and another murder took place about 1964.

Thornton Beach at this time was widely known for its wild flowers.

Up to and during the 1940's, there existed a beach colony of year-round "freedom seekers" and "sun worshipers". Mostly male, but including women and children, these people, mostly nudists, lived in more or less permanent shacks, built up against the cliffs. A few pilings and wooden posts can still be seen in some places.

Halfway up the ramp there are some concrete slabs and a foundation of some sort. According to some, this is the foundation of Thornton's house, but this is unlikely. It could also have been part of a concrete gun emplacement from World War II or the remains of an old restaurant that existed here at one time.

North of Thornton Beach the land is owned by the Olympic Club, a prominent San Francisco country club. They bought the land around 1918 from a Jewish-owned country club that was there before. The golf course on the west side of the highway was finished in 1924 and the clubhouse between 1915 and 1923.

At the present west corner of Alemany Boulevard and Skyline Boulevard there was a restaurant called the "Silver Saddle". At some time a casino was added on to it and due to the fact that this area was unincorporated, little attention was given to the affairs going on there.

Immediately adjacent to the restaurant there appears to have been several different stables set up at one time or another. A "Mar Vista Stables" was established in 1938-1939 by a Mr. Murry

Norton. He apparently established a garden supply business there also for his son until he was unfortunately killed in an accident while delivering supplies in the Half Moon Bay area.

During the war the Coast Guard stabled horses and men at the Mar Vista Stables for a beach patrol. There were many gun emplacements along the cliff tops and possibly at Thornton, too. Plans existed to mount two 16-inch guns in an emplacement at Thornton Heights, south of Thornton Beach, but the plans were shelved because of the danger from Commando type attack and also because of strategic considerations and the geological instability of the area.

An interesting event occurred on August 16, 1942, which has become an aviation mystery. The airship L8 with Lt. j.g. Ernest D. Cody and Ensign Charles E. Adams aboard took off from Treasure Island for a routine anti-submarine patrol. They reported by radio of sighting an oil slick and proceeded to investigate. They were seen descending through the cloud cover by a patrol boat. There were no more radio messages received from her. The next sighting of the L8 was south of Ft. Funston where it emerged from the fog at beach level. It touched the shore and one of her depth charges fell off. Thus lightened, she rose again and disappeared inland. The L8 came to rest in Daly City. There were no signs of the crew. Everything appeared normal except that the throttles for one engine were at full and the other at half throttle. The L8 type of airships were 150' long and 40' wide, powered with two 145 hp Warner Scarab engines, having a top speed of 62 mph. The mystery was never solved. Were

the crew captured by an enemy submarine? Did they attempt to work on the engines in flight and fall overboard? No one knows. No bodies were ever found.

On the bluffs between Ft. Funston and the stables a nike missile site was established after the war. This was probably the wartime site of "Baker Battery". The missile site was run by the Army but was then taken over by the California National Guard before reverting to the Army Again.

LIST OF PERSONNEL WHO WORKED AT THORNTON BEACH
(Not in order)

Fred Meyer

Glenn Griswold

Leo Boelens

Jim Taylor

Jess Burgin

Joe Wiley

D. Intoschi

J. Moorehouse

F. Meyer

W. Clark

B. Underwood

Ted Bravos

J.P. Ash

Hibbert

Allan Kimball

H. W. Keene

Jensen

Roger Miles

Mike Jaroff

Robert Van Tassel

Mondello

Baker

Lackey

Earl Carleton

Gamble

Joel Jette

Cook

Jack Graham

Max Foster

John Lucia

Mell Novell

Wagner

Lindel

J. O'Gorman

Short

Mitch Leon

Allan McCorkle

Corky Netherby

Tom Palmquist

Garry Strahan

Don Scott

Charles Holmquist

Jim Beattie

Jackson

Sorbello

Elmer Lindstrom

Doug Goeltz

John Walsh

Dan Ash

Leroy Merrel

Kurk Wilson

Mullins

Bill Chamberlain

And last but certainly not least, my own humble self, Nicholas J. Lee, Thornton Beach Perennial

## OUTLINE OF THORNTON BEACH EVENTS

Park started 1963 with portable restrooms. Taken over from San Mateo County Parks Commission.

Ramp constructed and partially paved, March 1964.

Ramp completed with addition of steps and ramp to bottom and cedar rails, January 1968.

Facilities fee first charged, March 1, 1964.

Dedication date June 20, 1964.

Parking lot resealed May 1968.

Proposed glider landing strip. Land bulldozed in preparation in June 1969.
First glider landed on August 6, 1969.
Project subsequently shelved.

Two Standard tankers (OREGON STANDARD and NEW JERSEY STANDARD) collided under Golden Gate Bridge, resulting in a large oil spill. This oil swept out to sea and up and down the coast. Standard Oil Company set up a cleanup coordination center in the Thornton Beach office. Very large response from volunteers to help clean up. January 18 - 25, 1971.

## BOATS WRECKED ON THORNTON BEACH

July 29, 1965 - fishing boat overturned in surf.

Sept. 19, 1968 - ketch La Viento - Wilber Corley & family
Removed by truck and trailer, September 22, 1968.

Nov. 9, 1968 - fishing boat Rita E - Edward Warner Ellis 454 40th, S.F.
1 fatality - James V. Spalding, 3579 19th Ave., S.F.

## GEOLOGY OF THE THORNTON STATE BEACH AREA

Thornton Beach is located just south of San Francisco/Daly City, County of San Mateo, border on the San Francisco peninsula.

The peninsula separates the Pacific Ocean from San Francisco Bay, a structural depression drowned by rising sea levels during the interglacial stages of the Pleistocene Epoch (10,000 to 100,000 years ago). The Bay is joined to the ocean by the Golden Gate, a deep narrow channel eroded by the ancient Sacramento River. An interesting, but little known, fact is that 15,000 years ago the sea level was some 400 feet below that which it is at present. This was the result of eutectic sea level changes due to the ice ages, when much sea water was tied up in the large masses of ice covering the northern areas. At this time, the western edge of the continent was on the other side of the Farallon Islands.

One of the most significant features of this area is the San Andreas rift zone. The trace of this fault, which trends north north-west - south south-east, runs through the Crystal Springs Reservoir trough and reaches the coast just north of Mussel Rock. From here it crosses the coastline to emerge again at Bolinas Lagoon, where it can be traced along to Tomales Bay and northwards.

The San Andreas rift is now classified as right-lateral, which means that when looking across the fault, the other side has moved to the right with respect to the point one is standing on. According to some experts, between 300 and 700 miles of movement can be traced according to the locale of the observers. The western side is now

moving in a northwards direction at an average rate of about 2 inches a year.

On the western side of the fault there are few exposures in this area. The Montara Block (Montara Cranodiorite Intrusion) south of Pacifica, Point Reyes and the Farallon Islands, twenty-seven miles west of the Golden Gate are all that remain. They are composed of Cretaceous granitic rock which includes fragments of pre-cretaceius Sur Series gneiss and crystalline limestone. To the east, the oldest exposed rocks are late Jurassic-Cretaceous, Franciscan Formation with no granitic or Sur Series rocks.

The Franciscan is a heterogeneous group of marine sedimentary and volcanic rocks of eugeosyndinal origin. Graywacke is predominant, with black shale, colored radiolanican cherts, greenstone and minor gray limestone also present. Metamorphic rocks of zeolite, glaucophane-schist and eclogite facies are a distinctive and characteristic part of the Franciscan. The Franciscan Formation is at least 30,000 feet thick and is much intraded by serpentine.

The geology of this area, despite years of study is still largely unknown but apparently the Merced Formation abuts onto the Franciscan in the western side of the peninsula and this in turn, is covered by the Colma Formation. This section can be divided into three stratigraphic units separated by unconformities. The Merced Formation, of Pliocene-Pleistocene age is separated from the Pleistocene Colma Formation by 500 feet of unnamed Pleistocene beds. The Merced Formation extends in a triangular belt across the peninsula 13 miles south from Lake Merced to San Bruno Mountain and across to Mussel Rock. The Merced unconformably overlies the Franciscan. The Merced is composed chiefly of more

than 4500 feet of sandy silt and fine sand interspersed with beds and lenses of coarse sand and well-rounded Franciscan chert gravels. The Colma Formation is composed of littoral sands, colluvium and soils, moderately well-sorted fine to medium grained sands with minor amounts of clay.

Thornton Beach itself is a result of a large slump block or rotational landslide. The elongated hill to the west of the parking lot is the top of the slump which pulled away from the cliff behind the office, possibly during the 1906 earthquake.

Vertical sections of the previously described formations can be seen from the beach. Some areas are highly fossiliferous, some fossils can be seen 'in-situ' although rather soft, and others are washed up on the beach frequently.

These fossils include the still living echinoid "Dendraster", lower pliocene to present and the extinct echenoid "Scutellaster" which died out at the end of the pliocene.

Other common fossils include the Pelecypods:

Clinocardium nuttalli
Protothaca staminea
Tapes semidecussata
Macoma secta
Macoma hasata
Pholadidea penita
Mya arenania
Saxidomus nuttalli
Pododesmus macrosolisma
Volsella demissa
Mytilus edulis
Mytilus californianus

And the gastropods:

Polinices leuisi
Thais emarginata
Thais lamellosa
Olivella biplicata
Nassarius mendicus
Acanthina spirata

Geology of the Thornton State Beach Area

References: A Walkers Guide to the Geology of San Francisco
Mineral Information Service, Nov. 1966

Field Trip San Francisco Peninsula - Bonilla Schlocker
U.S.G.S. Menlo Park, California

Course Outline - Geology 213B Field Trip
Pleistocene Deposits of Merced & Colma Formations
University of California, Berkeley

Readers interested in a further geologic history of the area should read:

"Evolution of the Landscape of the San Francisco Bay Region"
Arthur David Howard
University of California Press, 1962
(California Natural History Guide #7)

"California Through the Ages" The Geologic Story of a Great State
William J. Miller
Westernlore Press 1957, Los Angeles

"Geologic Guidebook of the San Francisco Bay Counties
History, Landscape, Geology, Fossils, Minerals,
Industry and Routes to Travel"
Bulletin 154, California Division Mines and Geology 1951

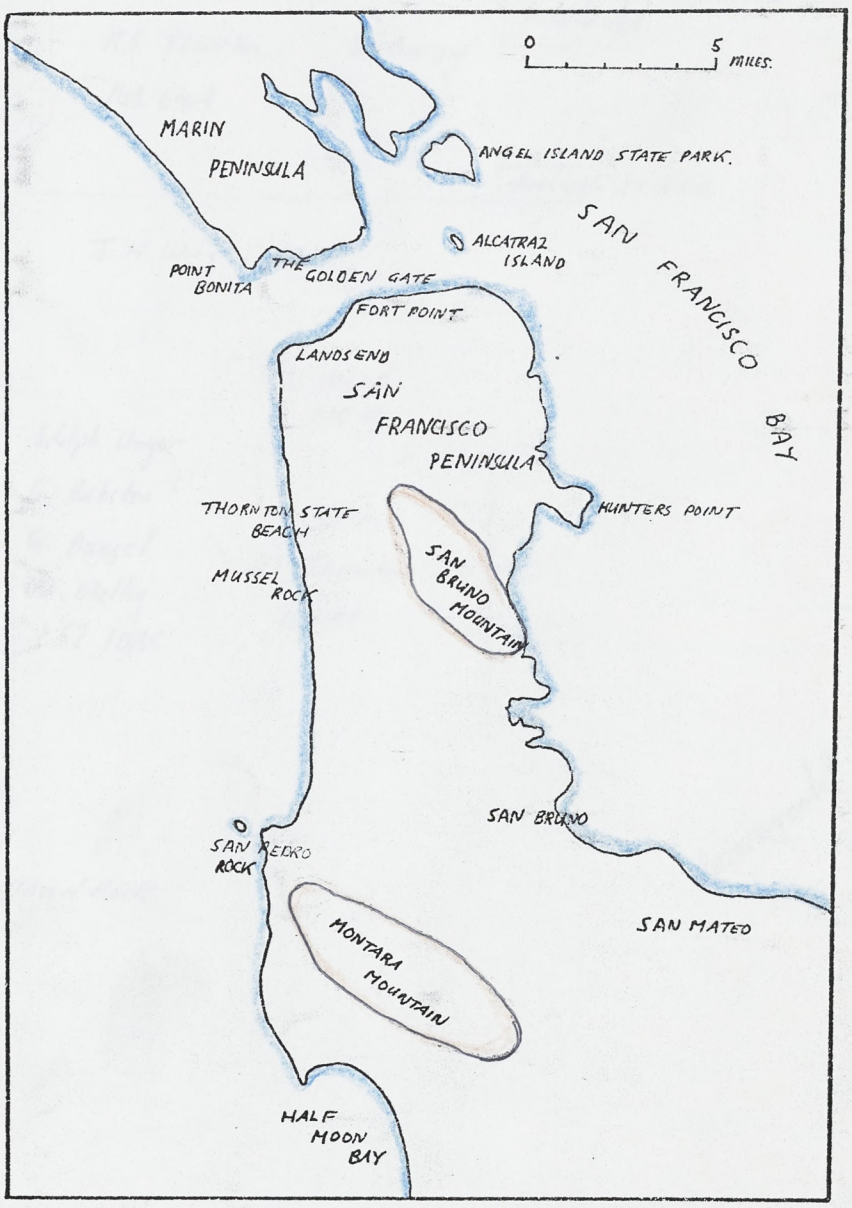
"Earth Song - a Prologue to History"
Charles L. Camp,
American West Publishing Co., Palo Alto, Calif.

Interesting papers are:

William Glen's "Pliocene and Lower Pleistocene of the Western Part of the San Francisco Peninsula" 1959 60 pages
U.C.B. Publication in Geology

Tim Falls unpublished paper on the area

# SAN FRANCISCO PENINSULA.



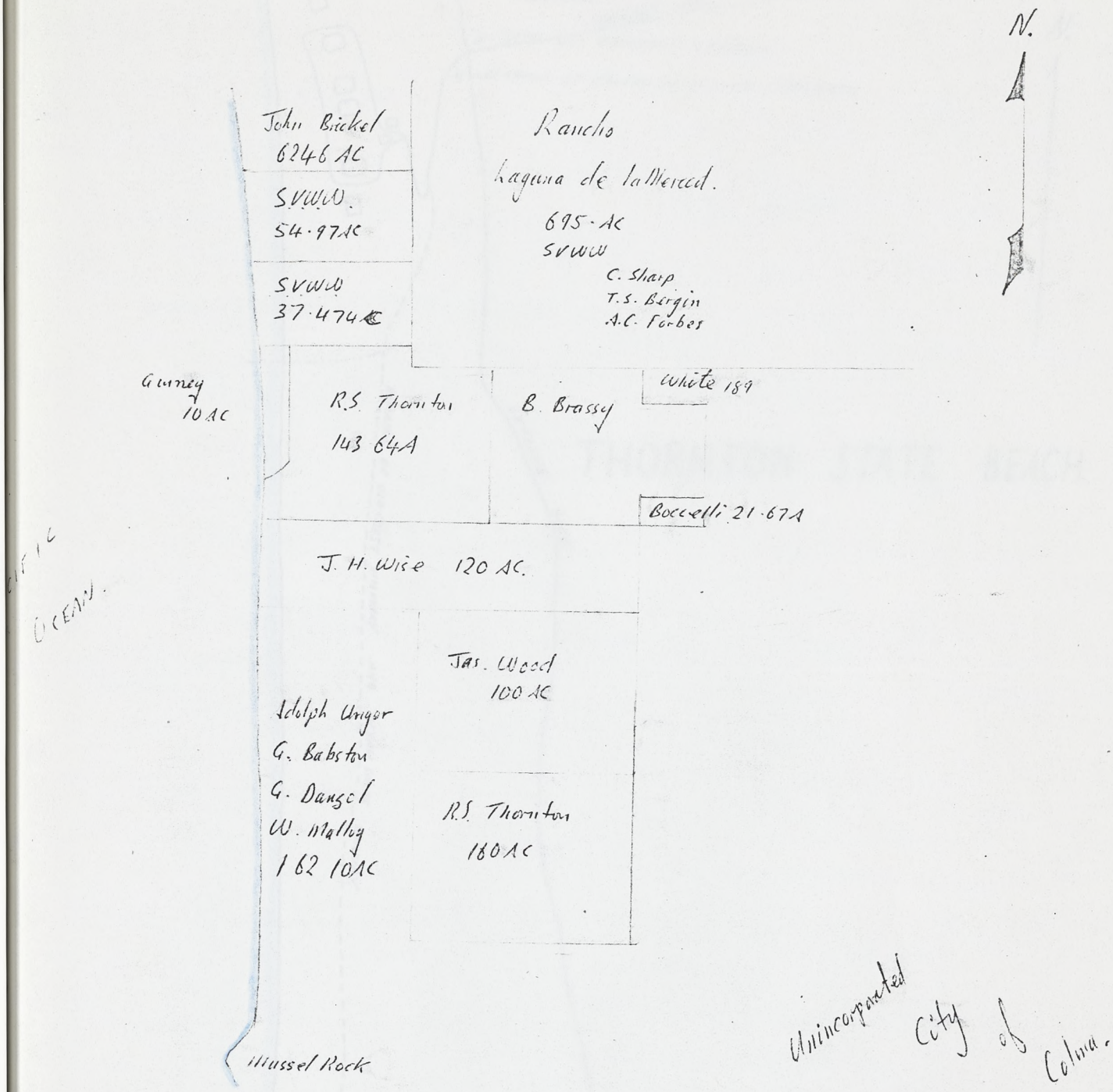

← 37° 45'

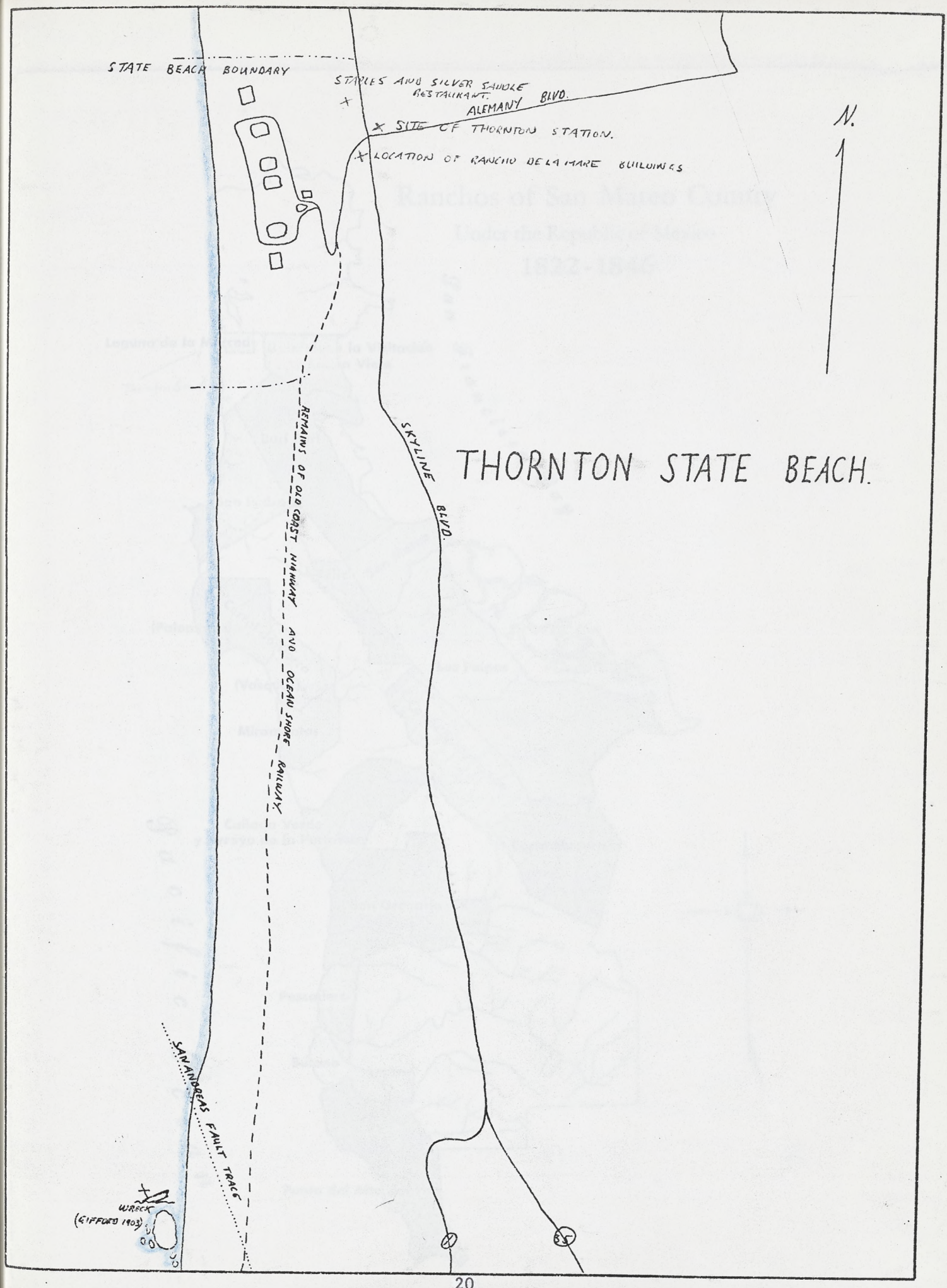
← 37° 30'

↑ 122° 30'

↑ 122° 15'

# Rough Approximation of Area's Property Owners.

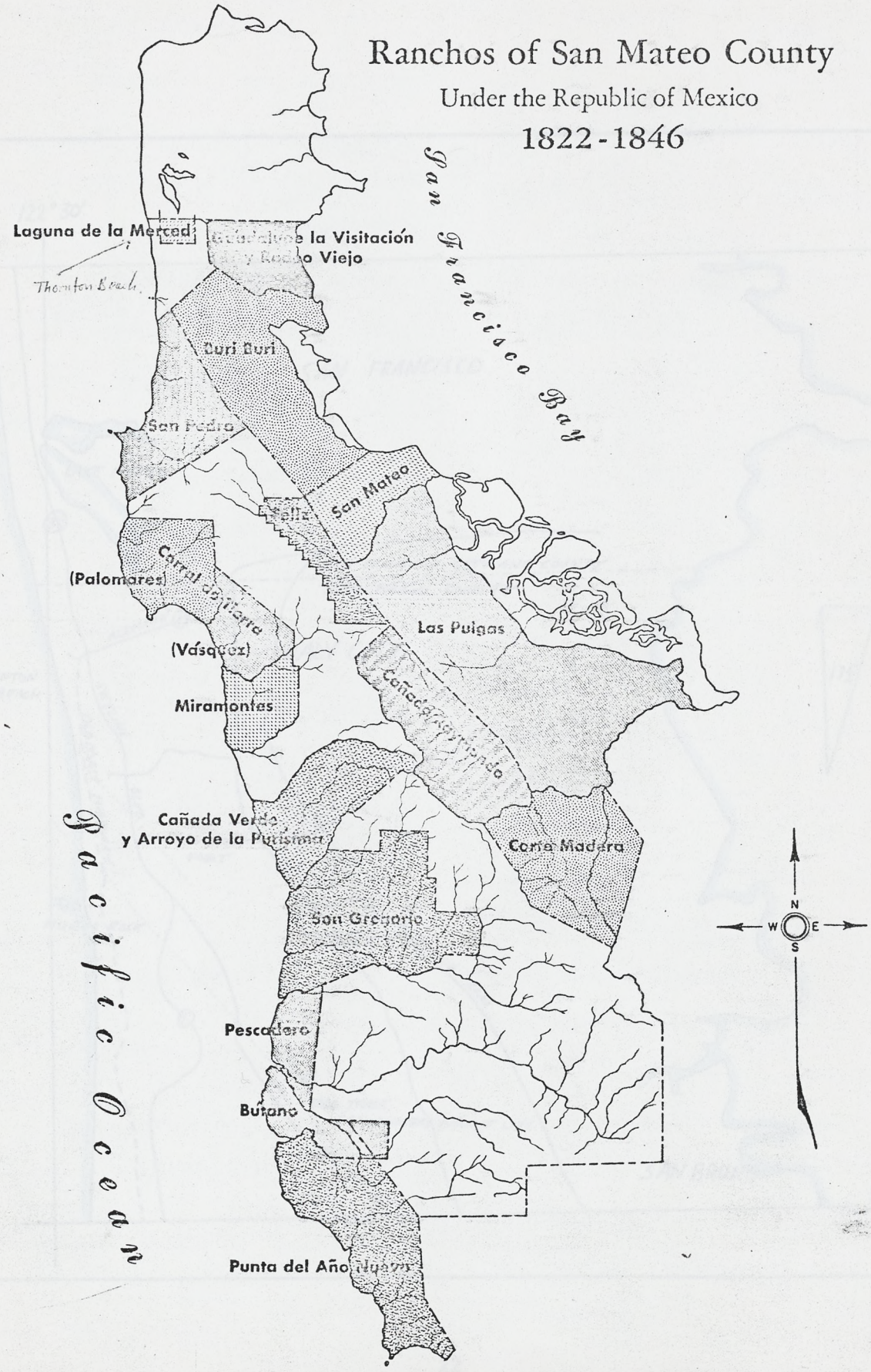



STATE BEACH BOUNDARY
STARLES AND SILVER SADDLE RESTAURANT.
ALEMANY BLVD.
SITE OF THORNTON STATION.
LOCATION OF RANCHO DE LA MARE BUILDINGS
N.
THORNTON STATE BEACH.
SKYLINE BLVD.
REMAINS OF OLD COAST HIGHWAY AVO OCEAN SHORE RAILWAY
SAN ANDREAS FAULT TRACE
WRECK (GIFFORD 1903)

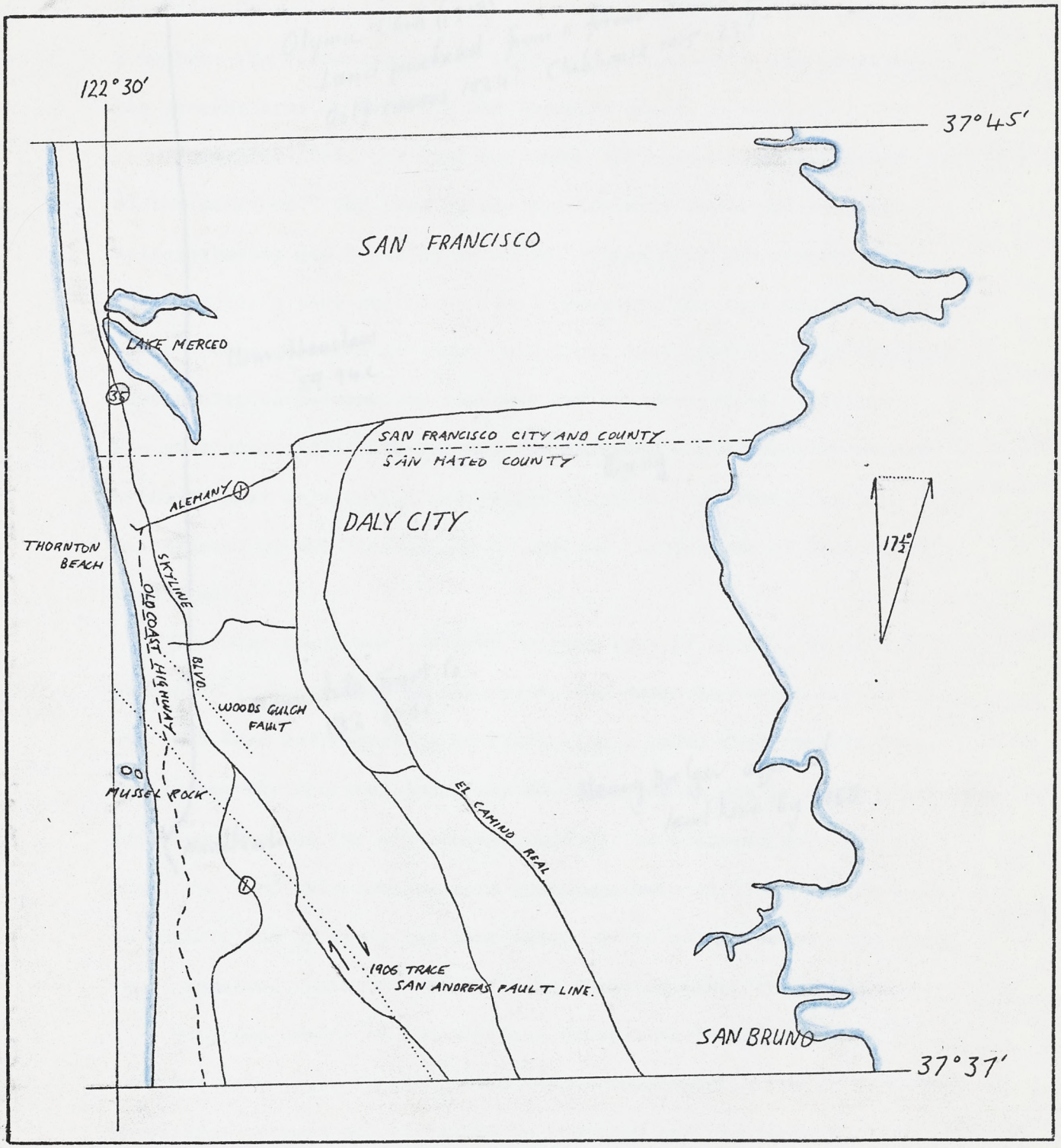
# Ranchos of San Mateo County

## Under the Republic of Mexico

## 1822 - 1846



# SAN FRANCISCO DALY CITY AREA.



Olymic Club (1918)
Land purchased from a former Jewish Country Club.
Golf courses 1924? Clubhouse 1915-23?

Wm. Henshaw
59.94c

Brassy

Mercantile Trust Co.
132.10c

Henry Doelger acquired
land here by 1950

Mussel Rock

## HISTORY OF THORNTON BEACH STATE PARK

Thornton Beach was first discovered by the early Spanish explorers. Francisco Ortega, under the command of Gaspar Portola, was looking for a harbor. He descended Sweeny Ridge and proceeded up the coast to the present area of Pacifica and Thornton Beach.

From 1776-1822, the land was under the control and influence of the missions. The area became particularly known for farming, salt-gathering and handling of sheep. These missions controlled the land for a long period of time. However, the land was eventually split up and parceled out into individual land grants. This resulted from a dispute between the missions and the government officials. The government officials claimed the missions had a monopoly on the price of beef sold to the government Presidio. An investigation was ordered by the Viceroy and he ordered the program of individual land grants.

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to go through legal proceedings before being granted. The land had been sold in small acreages by U.S. Government prior to the Homestead Act of 1853.

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This land that R. S. Thornton and the other settlers claimed had originally been claimed by Rancho de la Merced in 1853. This claim was denied by the government, but the matter did not end at that point. The Rancho was granted a new survey by the Government. The new survey was to include the land south of Rancho de la Merced (Thornton Beach). The settlers reacted vehemently to this new survey. They were prepared to hold up their claims by rifle fire if necessary. However, cooler heads prevailed and the "Battle of Colma" was averted. Under the leadership of R. S. Thornton, the settlers formed the north San Mateo Settlers Union and R. S. Thornton became its president. The purpose of the Union was to fight the new survey through the courts. The case was carried through the courts for a number of years, eventually ending up in the U.S. Supreme Court. The decision was in favor of the settlers and in 1866 they were able to return to their land. R. S. Thornton spent most of the civil war years fighting the case through the courts.

From 1866 until approximately 1900 the area in and around Thornton Beach was privately owned. There were some ten to fifteen different parcels of property under various ownerships. These were all private ownerships with Thornton himself owning approximately 160 acres. This corresponds approximately to the present Thornton Beach State Park.

In 1907 the Ocean Coast Railroad purchased 60 feet of right-of-way near the beach and built a station called Thornton Station. The Ocean Coast Railroad ran for about a dozen years. The entire line was never completed and in 1920, after going bankrupt, the company was dissolved. Motor cars and trucks took over the problems of transportation along the coast at this time.

After 1920, the Spring Valley Water Company bought out small parcels of land from the Ocean Coast Railroad. The war company owned a limited number of parcels of land in the area until approximately 1945 to 1950. The other parcels of land in the area were forfeited to the state for delinquent taxes. At this time Thornton Beach was about the same as it is today.

The County of San Mateo assumed the responsibility for the beach area around 1950. The County, however, found it could not provide adequate facilities to make the beach a recreation site. In 1955 the County Board of Supervisors agreed that the state could best provide for recreational development of the beach area. The land was turned over to the State Recreation and Parks Commission in 1955. The state developed Thornton Beach into a state recreation facility, and in the early 1960's opened Thornton Beach State Park to the public.

Today Thornton Beach is 36,356 acres of rugged and beautiful coastline of San Mateo County. A Ranger station was erected as well as picnic grounds and hiking trails to accommodate tourists and residents the year round.

SOURCES:

Daly City Library (Westlake Branch: Mr. Chandler)

San Mateo County Historical Society

San Mateo Coast State Beaches Association

San Mateo County Recreation and Parks Department

California Historical Society

California Recreation and Parks Commission

Title Insurance Company, Redwood City

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Dup made